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SUBJECT: Garotinho: President-in-Waiting or Political Exile?

1. Summary. Despite a series of polls and articles discussing the presidential chances of Rio de Janeiro's popular and populist ex-governor Anthony Garotinho, the issue of whether he is even eligible to run will not be decided for several days. Even if the electoral courts choose not to revoke his political rights because of irregular practices in last year's municipal elections, however, Garotinho's chances to be Brazil's next president will be hurt the longer the ongoing corruption scandal continues.

Will he run at all?

2. Several recent articles in major Brazilian newspapers have discussed the presidential candidacy of Rio de Janeiro's popular ex-governor Anthony Garotinho (usually in negative terms). A recent poll by the polling group IBOPE also showed Garotinho with the largest percentage of first round votes in an election without President Lula and in third place if Lula should run.

3. Yet despite the heated discussion of his potential candidacy, it is not clear whether Garotinho will be able to run for president, as his eligibility to hold political office is the subject of a case before the Regional Electoral Tribunal (TRE) related to electoral violations in last year's municipal elections. If the TRE decides to uphold an earlier suspension of Garotinho's political rights, his campaign may die before it even begins. A decision is expected early in October, and if it goes against Garotinho it will probably be appealed to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). Several other politicians accused of similar crimes recently had their political rights suspended by the same TRE, including the mayor of the city of Campos, a Garotinho stronghold.

If he runs, will it matter?

4. Even if Garotinho is able to run, it is not certain that he will be a powerful candidate come 2006, because the ongoing corruption scandal is slowly damaging his candidacy in several ways.

- While the scandal has weakened President Lula's position substantially, anticorruption is not a strong plank in Garotinho's platform given his own dubious record and the fact that his base of power is in Rio de Janeiro, where corruption and politics are almost synonyms. The longer public attention is focused on corruption, the worse Garotinho's chances will be as the public looks for more respectable candidates. Garotinho's own PMDB party has been reluctant to endorse his candidacy, and has reportedly approached several other potential candidates.

- The scandal is also drawing the spotlight to other political actors and events. A recent Globo article on Garotinho's growing nationwide network of evangelical radio stations was buried deep in the back, while the front page featured a report on the almost celebrity-like fame of the investigation committee members. Garotinho has done an admirable job of keeping his name in the news despite the scandal, but with limited political coverage to go around his lack of any prominent role in the scandal may hurt his visibility.

- If the economy continues to perform well and the public tires of the seemingly endless investigations, Lula may yet emerge as a viable candidate for the 2006 elections. As Garotinho and Lula draw their support from the same populist base, another Lula candidacy would probably spell the end for Garotinho's political chances. Garotinho himself seems to recognize this. At a recent book signing he took the opportunity to snipe at Lula's populist credentials, claiming that Lula is being kept in power not by the people but rather by a self-interested elite who want to avoid damaging the economy (Comment: This is a fairly accurate analysis, but Lula also still enjoys considerable support among the general populace.)

Comment

5. Garotinho appears to be down but by no means out of the presidential race. If he can survive the investigation by the electoral commissions, he remains a potent political

force, with his wide popular base and his ties to the evangelical movement. At the very least, he could garner enough votes to force a second round. And if the economy should take a turn for the worse or if the scandal reaches Lula's doorstep, he may in fact turn into a frontrunner. In the short term, however, he is likely to face an uphill battle to capture national attention away from the corruption scandals.

16. This cable was cleared by Embassy Brasilia.

ATKINS